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THE TEACHING OF JESUS.

III. HIS TEACHING CONCERNING GOD.

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The basis of his teaching.—God as a Spirit, involving universality of religion—as Light—as Love.—Fatherhood of God—natural and spiritual—the parables of the Good Shepherd and the prodigal son—Fatherhood taught in the person and life of Jesus.—Contrasted with the teaching of the Jews.

THE teaching of Jesus concerning God rests upon an Old Testament basis. The God whom he reveals is the Jehovah whom the Jews worshiped. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman he classed himself with the Jews in respect to the knowledge of God, and said : “We (the Jews) worship that which we know ; for salvation (the Messianic deliverance) is from the Jews” (John 4 : 22). In comparison with all other ancient peoples, the Jews possessed and preserved a deeper and truer knowledge of God. Jehovah was to them the one, only God, the Almighty Creator and Governor. He was a spiritual Being, a holy God who hated all impurity and sin, the righteous Ruler and Judge of all mankind.

Upon this idea of God our Lord based his teaching and work, as against the pantheism and polytheism which were so common in ancient oriental nations. Jesus assumed as true the spiritual monotheism of the Jewish people. It must not, however, be supposed that Jesus found no serious defects in the Jewish idea of God, and that he added no important elements of truth to the existing conception of God’s nature and relations. Some such defects he clearly specified, others he assumed and supplied by the tone and spirit of his own teaching. In the conversation just referred to, for example, he admits that the Jews hold too limited and local an idea of God in supposing that he can be worshiped to any special advantage in Jerusalem, and he affirms

that the time is coming, and is already present—so far, that is, as men have accepted his deeper and truer idea—when men will not limit God's worship to any *place*, but will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.

We can best see how Jesus' doctrine of God goes beyond that of his contemporaries, and, in certain points, supplements and corrects it, by reviewing some of his most important teachings on the subject. It will be convenient to begin with the great principle which he set over against the limited idea of the Jews and Samaritans: "God is spirit" (John 4 : 24). This rendering of the statement, which is found in the margin of the Revised Version is decidedly to be preferred to the common translation: "God is a spirit." Both the emphatic position, in the original, of the word for "spirit," and the context of the passage, show that it is the *nature*, rather than the *personality*, of God which Jesus intends to define. As against the idea that God's presence is local, Jesus asserts that his nature is spiritual and that he is not, therefore, limited to any place, but may be worshiped anywhere. From God's nature as spirit the true conception of his worship is also to be derived. He is to be worshiped "in spirit," that is, with true inward reverence and consecration, and "in truth," that is, with true and worthy conceptions of what he is and requires.

It will readily be seen that the idea of God as spirit involves important consequences for religion and theology. The appreciation of that idea in its full significance would inevitably break down the narrow particularism of the Jews. If God was a universal spirit, he could not be the God of the Jewish people alone. He must be the God and Father of all men and all must have some access to him. Thus Christ's idea of God involved as its corollary the destined universality of the true religion. It was a great thing for any Jewish mind to see this truth of God's spirituality; it involved his universal relations with men and his love and interest for all. Its effect on the mind of Peter, who had grown up in the narrower, Jewish methods of thought, is familiar. After his great vision he saw that God was "no respecter of persons; but that in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him" (Acts 10 : 35).

With the idea that God is spirit stand closely connected two expressions of the apostle John which, though not used, so far as we know, by our Lord himself, do certainly embody the spirit of his teaching concerning God: "God is light," and "God is love." The definition of God as spirit lays emphasis upon what he *is* in his innermost nature or essence. It comprehends what in theology are called his immanent attributes. The idea of God as light and as love suggests rather what God *does* in his relations. These words suggest his transitive attributes, his tendency to reveal himself, to create and to bless. No figure could express this and kindred thoughts better than that of light. It is pure, diffusive, life-giving. In nature light is the condition of all human well-being. Without it there could be no life and no beauty. All means of subsistence would fail, man would perish and the world would become a charnel-house of death. In like manner the source of all spiritual life, joy, and hope is God. Light is the symbol of his boundless beneficence and grace which make human existence a boon and fill life with meaning, purpose, and hope.

Similar thoughts are involved in the definition of God as love. Light is a figurative synonym for love. Love is a name for God's disposition to reveal himself in giving and blessing. God creates because he is love. He redeems because he is love. The word *love* comprehends his whole moral nature in its forth-putting of interest and sympathy and in its communication of good. But while the statement "God is love" is the most comprehensive summary of the moral attribute of God which the Bible contains, it is more agreeable to our present purpose to consider the more concrete representations of God's love which Jesus was accustomed to make in his teaching

One of his favorite methods of representing the divine goodness was that of dwelling upon the fatherhood of God. The sermon on the mount is full of this idea. He exhorts men to love one another, yes, even to love their enemies. Why? "That ye may be the sons of your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5 : 45), and then he proceeds to say that God their Father loves all, whether his love is reciprocated or not. They, too, must love

all, if they will be his true sons, that is, will be morally akin to him in the spirit of their action. It is to the exercise of this large and generous love that he exhorts them when he says : "Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5 : 48). This perfection of God, of which Jesus speaks, consists in his love, as the previous verses show. God's moral nature as love is the type, the ideal, of all personal perfection of life ; all men approximate that ideal in proportion as they too exercise the spirit of love, charity and helpfulness toward others.

Another aspect of God's fatherhood is presented where Jesus speaks of the providential care of God for his creatures. Why be anxious, he says, about food and raiment? "Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things" (Matt. 6 : 32). It cannot be that God, who provides in nature for the birds, and clothes the wild lily with beauty, can be forgetful of man, his highest creation, whom he has made in his own moral image. God cannot do the lesser thing and forget the greater.

Attention should here be called to the fact that God is called Father only in relation to personal beings. It is *your* Father who feeds the birds (Matt. 6 : 26), not *their* Father. This is but to say that the terms, fatherhood, sonship and love, denote personal relations. God is never spoken of as loving any order of creation beneath man. He is never called the Father of any beings except moral beings. Fatherhood, therefore, involves a moral kinship. God is the Father of those whom he has made capable of obedience and communion with himself.

The question is often raised, whether it is proper to speak of all men, or only of believers, as sons of God. Careful discriminations are necessary in order to answer it in accord with New Testament teaching. Unquestionably God is spoken of as the Father of all men. He is always loving and gracious, whatever men may be. He always remains, if we may so speak, what he ought to be ; he always corresponds perfectly to the ideal. Are all men, then, sons of God? Ideally and in their possibility they are. But men are not actually what they ought to be ; they do not correspond to their ideal. It is on man's side that the true

relations which "fatherhood" and "sonship" express, have been impaired. These two words should be perfect correlates, but, as the case really stands, they are not so. God *is* the Father of all men, since he, on his side, always remains what he ought to be, but men must *become* sons of God (in the true sense of moral kinship to God) because their side of the relation has been impaired by sin and it is by a change in *them* that this relation of fellowship and likeness must be restored. Hence the New Testament speaks only of the obedient as sons of God in the true moral sense. Others have forfeited their sonship by sin, although it is still theirs by right and possibility, but they regain it only by repentance and return to God in obedience and love. In other words, the New Testament does not speak of what I may call the natural relation in which all men stand to God as his creatures, as sonship, but reserves that term to express the closer spiritual relation which is constituted by faith and obedience. The correctness of this distinction will be clearly seen from the following passage in John (1: 12); "As many as *received him*, to them gave he the right (or privilege) to *become* children of God, even to them that *believe* on his name."

The fatherly love of God to man is nowhere more impressively set forth than in the group of parables which constitute the fifteenth chapter of Luke. The chapter opens with a picture of two classes of persons in the presence of Jesus. On the one hand, "the publicans and sinners were drawing near unto him to hear him," and on the other "the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying: this man receives sinners and eateth with them." Here were the abandoned classes, the outcasts of society, and the orthodox and pious religionists side by side. The former classes were despised by the latter, who thought them outlawed from the mercy of God. What Jesus says of the attitude of God towards the wretched and sinful is presented in the three parables of the lost sheep, the lost piece of money and the prodigal son.

In the first parable he teaches that just as a shepherd concerns himself especially for a member of his flock which becomes lost, so God feels special solicitude for the wayward, the abandoned and the despairing. The Pharisees criticised Jesus for recog-

nizing persons of this class ; he replies by saying that God thinks upon them with special anxiety and yearning. He thus shows that in concerning himself for the salvation of the most immoral, he is but doing what the Father does, and that his conduct was the warrant of the Father's own action. The second parable is of similar import. A woman who has ten pieces of money and loses one, will give more concern to the one lost piece than to all the nine which remain in safe keeping. So God in his redeeming mercy seeks the lost—those who are lost to self-respect, to hope, to their own usefulness and to their divinely appointed destiny—and the more utterly lost men are, the more does the divine compassion pity their misery and ruin.

Then comes the parable of the prodigal son, that matchless portrayal of the fatherly compassion of God. Of both the sons God is the Father ; but the younger son forfeits by disobedience and ingratitude his true filial standing. As he himself expresses it, he is "no more worthy to be called" a son. In the true moral sense he is not what a son should be. The natural relation to his father, however, still remains as the possible basis for the reconstitution of the true relation of obedience and fellowship. He is a son in possibility still ; nothing can ever make it untrue that he was born in his father's house and that he has a right to his father's bounty as soon as he is willing on his part to fulfill his part of the relation. If he has lost the rights and dignity of sonship, he has lost them by his own unfilial life, and they belong to him and shall be his as soon as he will "arise and go to his father," and in penitence and obedience seek his favor and blessing.

What more powerful description—sublime in its simplicity—of the fatherliness, the pity, the forgiving mercy of God, could be given than that which is presented in this parable. It is an epitome of the whole gospel. It teaches at once man's actual sinfulness and estrangement from God and the possibility of return and welcome which is always open to him. It contains the gist of all biblical teaching concerning God, that he is at once just and merciful, banishing from his favor sinful man no longer than man refuses to return to him in trust and obedience. The grace

of God! that is the germ-truth of the whole gospel; that is what Jesus came to reveal and apply to the world's sin; that is the watchword under whose inspiration the apostle to the Gentiles did his work and it is that truth which he left as his legacy to his churches and to the world; in short, the grace of God is the burden of the whole Bible and the very heart and soul of all biblical religion.

But it was not merely in Jesus' *teaching* that he emphasizes the grace and fatherhood of God; he emphasized these truths by the whole spirit and work of his life. When Philip said unto him, "Show us the Father, and it sufficeth us," he answered: "Have I been so long time with you, and dost thou not know me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; how sayest thou, show us the Father?" (John 14:8, 9). What could Jesus mean by saying that to see him was to see the Father? Many passages show that he could not have intended to identify himself absolutely with the Father, denying all distinction between the Father and himself. He must have meant that in his own person and work the fatherliness of God was so revealed that one need not look elsewhere to obtain a knowledge of what God is. His life is the adequate revelation of God. He and the Father are one in nature, in spirit and in working (John 10:30). "My Father worketh hitherto," says Jesus, the Father has always been active in blessing and saving men, "and I work" (John 5:17). The life of Jesus is all in the line of the Father's unceasing beneficence and in the historical interpretation and realization of it.

Jesus' doctrine of God is to be derived, therefore, not merely from what he said about God, but from what he did and was. He is himself the revelation of God, the interpretation of God to man. His life is the self-utterance of God in history. He is the true living *Word* of God, the image, the expression of deity whereby we learn most of the nature and feelings towards us of the infinite and invisible God. He reveals God's fatherly qualities by exhibiting towards men a more than human compassion and tenderness, and by himself living, in his relation to God, a perfectly filial life, thus showing man how to be certain of God's fatherhood by himself living the filial, obedient life.

It should be apparent even from this brief review of the salient features of the teaching of Jesus concerning God that it stands in sharpest contrast, at important points, with the common Jewish notion of the time which narrowed the idea of God to that of a patron of their own nation, and then removed him far away from all living contact with human life. It was the effort of Jesus to expand and elevate the current idea of God by magnifying his love and compassion for all men, and to replace the cold, absentee deity of Judaism with the living, present Father who draws near to men in mercy and blessing.